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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000637

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM PHUM PREL AJ

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: ARRESTS SUCCEED IN SUPPRESSING SOME YOUTH ACTIVISM

REF: A. BAKU 624

1B. BAKU 594 AND PREVIOUS

1C. BAKU 387

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Lu, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: Youth activist Agasif Shakiroglu was released from detention on August 7, and immediately conscripted into the army, despite the normal August break in conscriptions. Detained bloggers Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade remain in detention, however, and their lawyers indicate that the GOAJ's investigation will produce falsified evidence that could well result in their conviction. Efforts continue by Milli and Hajizade's family and close friends to advocate publicly for their release, with online petitions, lawsuits, and attendance at court hearings. Civil society leaders report, however, that these arrests have affected the willingness of young people to participate in political activities in the future. End Summary.

ONE ACTIVIST FREED THEN CONSCRIPTED

12. (C) Agasif Shakiroglu (reftel A) was released from pre-trial detention on August 7 after the court of appeals ruled that he should be released. He was immediately called into military service upon his release. Poloff attended a press conference on Friday held by Shakiroglu's family and the Musavat Youth organization. Several youth activists from other organizations also attended. All agreed that Shakiroglu's arrest was related to his political activities, as he had met on several occasions during July with the military recruitment office, and had been told to wait until October to be conscripted. All also noted that there is normally no conscription in Azerbaijan during August. (COMMENT: While this case appears to be resolved for the moment, there is a possibility of further harm coming to Shakiroglu while he serves in the army. The Embassy will continue to monitor this case. END COMMENT)

LITTLE PROGRESS ON FREEING TWO OTHER ACTIVISTS

13. (C) On August 10 the Sabail District Court held a hearing on Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade's lawsuit against the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Prosecutor General for violating the presumption of innocence of the two men in their public statements. The hearing was closed to observation, which, according to legal experts, is a

violation of Azerbaijan's commitments under the Council of Europe. Nevertheless, poloff, several other diplomats, and about thirty family, friends, and members of the press gathered outside the court house to await news. After an hour of deliberations, the judge denied the motion, without giving an explanation as to why. In a closed meeting after the trial with poloff and counterparts from the French and German Embassies, the judge also refused to explain, stating he would only provide his verdict in written form to the lawyers in four to five days.

¶4. (C) On August 11, the Charge hosted a meeting with the lawyers for the two men, Isakhan Ashurov and Elton Guliyev, also attended by the German Ambassador and Charges d'Affaires from the Norwegian and British Embassies. The lawyers explained that evidence for the official investigation of the incident was being falsified, and stated that their only hope for freeing the young men was intervention from the President. As they had no access to the President themselves, they asked the Embassies to speak to the President for them, and ask for the young men to be released. Separately, Hajizade's father, Hikmet Hajizade, reported that he has received no response to his backchannel inquiries to President Aliyev's family (reftel B), another indication that the GOAJ may not yet have decided what it will do about the case. (Note: The conversation the following day that Charge and outgoing EUR DAS Bryza had about the case is reported septel. End Note.)

ARRESTS RAISE FEARS IN PARTS OF YOUTH COMMUNITY

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¶5. (C) According to comments from many civil society leaders, and poloff's observations, there is a group of 100 to 200 active young leaders in Baku who have been, over the last six months, getting more active and more professional in their activities, particularly in reaction to the March referendum, April shooting at the State Oil Academy, and June draft NGO law. A large portion of these activities take place in cyberspace, in the form of Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and blogs. The beating and arrest of Hajizade and Milli, two of the most visible leaders of this group, was, according to many of these youth leaders, an attempt to scare this group into being quiet. In an August 5 meeting with poloff, Ilgar Mammadov, head of the Council of Europe's Program in Political Studies in Azerbaijan and therefore one of the mentors to these youth activists, told poloff that while the arrests have further motivated the most active of this group, they have been successful in silencing most of the less determined young people. Mammadov is planning to reduce the number of municipalities in which he was planning to run young candidates in December's municipal elections, as the number of people interested in participating has plummeted after the arrests. The members of Milli's AN Network and Hajizade's Ol Youth Movement are generally the Western-educated elite of Azerbaijan, and so they and their families have the most to lose from being arrested.

¶6. (C) This climate of fear was notable when the leadership of the U.S.-Educated Alumni Association of Azerbaijan (AAA) discussed the possibility of issuing their own statement in support of Hajizade, who, as a FLEX alumni, is a member of the primary U.S. alumni group. When the chairman of the group announced his intention to have AAA speak up on behalf of Hajizade and Milli, board members cautioned that any statement could put AAA onto the list of targeted groups, jeopardizing its ability to act as a social and professional networking organization. A rigorous internal debate followed, and, after a membership vote, AAA did put out a statement in early August, but it was a carefully worded testimonial to Hajizade's character rather than a more forceful political call for justice. The AAA members were clearly spooked by the arrests of young leaders who many knew very well.

¶7. (C) Before these arrests, this elite group of activists was not well connected to the more numerous community of youth activists from other social classes -- those who do not speak English and are largely connected to traditional opposition parties, such as Shakiroglu and the "Hadaf" Coalition. These two groups could not agree on a common protest on May 10 after the Oil Academy shooting (reftel C). At an August 7 press conference about Shakiroglu's arrest, many opposition party members participated in the discussion, while the one AN Network member present remained silent. The arrests also may be spurring this divide, as (confidentially) both Hikmet Hajizade and Ilgar Mammadov told poloff that they suspect Orkhan Gafarli, who was the leader of the non-AN/OI May 10 protest, of organizing the arrest of Hajizade and Milli, as Gafarli was the one who arranged the dinner at the Lebanese restaurant. While Gafarli may not be responsible, this suspicion fuels the mistrust between the youth activism camps.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) While some members of the elite youth groups have become more active in response to the continued closing of political space in Azerbaijan, these activities have not reached the general public. Internet access in Azerbaijan is expensive, even when compared to other countries in the South Caucasus, and USAID surveys have shown that most people access the internet at internet game centers and cafes, where their usage is easily monitored. Therefore, there is only a small group of people that read the blogs and videos that these youth groups produce. YouTube shows that most of the OI videos have received well under 1,000 hits; in comparison the videos of Azerbaijan's entry into the Eurovision Song Contest have nearly half a million hits. In addition, the activities of these youth groups, including the recent

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arrests, which were reported in the New York Times, the Washington Post, etc., are not covered in Azerbaijan's traditional media, which is largely controlled by the GOAJ.

¶9. (C) In addition, Milli's activities were never aimed at organizing a mass movement against the GOAJ. As he often explained to poloff and others, what he was attempting to do was organize a network of elite, Western-educated young people who think differently than their parents and the current ruling regime, and who would support democratic change when the time comes, bethat 5, 10 or 20 years into the future. Milli wated to create the technocratic background for a ifferent Azerbaijan in the future. Hajizade and the OI Youth Movement similarly wanted to spread the word about being democratic and tolerant to their peer group * the several thousand young people in Azerbaijan who have studied in the West and come back to work at major international companies and organizations in Azerbaijan. The arrest of Milli and Hajizade will likely deter many of these young people from participating actively and openly in any future youth groups.

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